

Supporting Language and Literacy Skills from 0-12 Months

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The idea of babies and toddlers talking and reading can seem incredible, but language and literacy skills start early—from birth. Learn how you can support these skills from 0-12 months.



Watching your baby and learning how she communicates through sounds, facial expressions, and gestures are all important ways to help her learn about language and the written word.

It isn't necessary to "teach" very young children. Formal classes and other activities that push babies and toddlers to read and write words do not help their development or make the do better in school. In fact, they can even make children feel like failures when they are pushed to do something they can't enjoy or that is beyond their skills.

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Early language and literacy skills are learned best through everyday moments with your child –reading books, talking, laughing and playing together. Children learn language when you talk to them and they communicate back to you, and by hearing stories read and songs sung aloud. Children develop early literacy skills when you give them the chance to play with and explore books and other written materials like magazines, newspapers, take-out menus, markers, and crayons.

Language and literacy, while two different skills, build on one another in important ways.

What You Can Do

What you can do to support your baby’s growing language and literacy skills from 0-12 Months:

- Describe her feelings and experiences. For example, when you see that she is hungry, you can say: You are nuzzling at my shirt. You’re telling me you’re hungry. Okay, your milk is coming right up! Although your baby won’t understand your words right away, your caring, loving tone of voice and actions will make her feel understood. And hearing these words over and over again will help her come to understand them over time.
- Copy your baby’s sounds and encourage him to imitate you.
- Put words to her sounds: I think you want to tell me about the doggy over there. Look at that doggy. Hi, doggy!
- Sing songs you know, or make up songs about your baby (Happy bathtime to you, happy bathtime to you, happy bathtime, sweet baby, happy bathtime to you.) You don’t have to be on key or be good at carrying a tune. Babies don’t judge—they love hearing your voice.
- Play peek-a-boo. This simple turn-taking game is good practice for how to have a conversation later on. Try hiding behind a book, a pillow or a scarf. You can also play peek-a-boo by holding your baby in front of a mirror and then moving away from your reflection. Move back in front of the mirror and say, “peek-a-boo!”
- Play back-and-forth games. Hand your baby a rattle or soft ball. Then see if she will hand it back to you. See if you can exchange the toy a few times. This “back-and-forth” is practice for having a conversation later on.
- Read lots of books. Reading together helps your baby develop a love of reading and a familiarity with books. Reading aloud also helps your baby’s vocabulary grow as she has many chances to hear new words and learn what they mean.

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- Use books as part of your baby’s daily routines. Read before naptime or bedtime. Share books made of plastic at bath time. Read a story while you are waiting for the bus. Bring books to the doctor’s office to make the time go faster.
- Read with gusto. Use different voices for different characters in the stories you read your baby. Babies love when adults are silly and it makes book reading even more fun.
- Let your baby “read” her own way. Your baby may only sit still for a few pages, turn the pages quickly or only want to look at one picture and then be done. She may even like to just mouth the book, instead of read it! Follow your baby’s lead to make reading time a positive experience. This will nurture her love of literacy from the start.
- Repeat, repeat, repeat. Babies learn through repetition because it gives them many chances to “figure things out.” When babies tell you they are interested in a book or even in a picture in a book, give them as long as they want to look at the picture or to hear the story over and over.

Parent-Child Activities

Parent-Child Activities to Promote Language and Literacy

- **Make a photo album.** Glue photos of your baby and the important people in her life onto sturdy 4x6 index cards. Punch a hole in the upper left corner of each card and tie them together with a short piece of yarn. Share the book with your baby. She will love seeing pictures of the people she loves and hearing you talk about them (and her!).
- **Touch some new textures.** Gather together small squares of different fabrics (lace, cotton, corduroy, nylon, etc.). Snip a small hole through each square and tie them together with a piece of ribbon (they can also be stitched together at the corner as well). Let your baby touch the fabric “book” and talk about how the different textures feel. Does she have a favorite page?
- **Sing some “finger play” songs.** These are songs that have hand movements to go with them. “Finger plays” help children develop muscle strength and coordination in their fingers, which helps them learn to write and draw later on. A baby favorite is Pat-a-Cake: Pat-a-cake, Pat-a-cake, Baker’s Man (clap hands together), Bake me a cake as fast as you can (pretend to stir the batter), Roll it (roll your hands over one another, as if you are rolling dough), Pat it (pat your thighs), And mark it with a B for Baby and me (draw a B in the air with your finger). Other favorites are Where is Thumbkin and The Wheels on the Bus.

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What's most important about the activities you do with your baby is that they are fun for both of you. And while you are having fun, your child is also learning. Think of a game or song your baby loves. How do you think this game might also be nurturing his growing language and literacy skills?

Frequently Asked Questions

What can I expect from my 4-month-old when it comes to reading books with her?

Literacy is a process that builds over time, with each new skill adding to the one before. Keep in mind, though, that literacy is not just a skill, it is also a love—a love of books and the magic they offer.

Below are some general guidelines about how children play with books from birth to age 3:

- 0-6 months: May calm down while a familiar story or rhyme is read.
- 6-8 months: May begin to explore books by looking, touching and mouthing. May seem fascinated by a particularly bright picture.
- 9-11 months: May have a favorite picture—for example of a smiling baby or a familiar-looking object.
- 12-18 months: May begin turning pages or holding a book as if she is “reading.” May begin saying the word “book” and/or showing a preference for a specific book at bedtime.
- 24-36 months: May begin anticipating the story. For example, while reading Goldilocks and the Three Bears, your toddler may say, “Just right!” as soon as he sees the picture of Goldilocks spooning up her porridge. She may also request the same story over and over, and may pretend to read books on her own or tell you simple stories.

My son is six-months-old. Is this too young to start reading together?

It's never too early to start. While 6 months may seem young to read to a baby, it is actually in these first months and years that early reading skills are developing. Literacy starts with a love of, and interest in, books. The goal at this age is for your son to have pleasurable and positive experiences with books so that he wants to keep learning about them. So go ahead and provide your child with chunky board books or soft cloth books that he can safely look at, chew on, and read with you. Choosing sturdy books like these means that you don't have to say “no” or take the book away, which may build negative feelings about book play. Let him explore books in the ways he knows how right now.

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My 9-month-old is so active that he doesn't want to stop to read a book. This worries me because I know how important reading is. What can I do to get him interested?

Build book-reading and language into your child's everyday life. Include a story, rhyme, or song as part of your child's bedtime routine. Use books to help your child move between activities (e.g., a book about naps before naptime, or a book about baths before bath time). Make up rhymes or sing songs while playing with your child or driving in the car. This helps build a love of words and sounds. Look for words to read all around you—on signs, on trucks, on food boxes and labels. Finally, leave books where your child can reach them and let him explore them in any way he likes—even if it is only for a few seconds at a time. Don't force him to sit or read for longer than he wants. This can lead to his having negative feelings about books.

I hear so much about how important it is to read to your baby. But my 8-month-old only seems interested in mouthing the book. Should I be stricter about us reading together, rather than just playing with the book?

Congratulations on getting your 8-month-old excited about books! Mouthing is a key way babies show interest in and explore books. Her chewing and mouthing is showing you how much she likes books.

Babies explore the world through their senses—using their eyes, hands, and mouths. Mouthing is not only normal, it's one of the first and best ways that babies learn about the shape, size and texture of the things they see in their world. Books, with their bright colors and flapping pages, are especially interesting. Your daughter is doing all she can to learn more about these interesting and delightful square things.

I am a mom of a newborn. French is my native language. I have heard conflicting opinions on speaking both French and English with my baby— some say it's good, others say that it can delay language development. What should I do?

Go for it. Exposing your baby to both English and French will help her learn 2 languages (bilingualism) before she ever begins school. And, by providing your baby the opportunity to learn the language of your family's culture, you are giving her a connection to her family's roots and traditions.

There is still a lot of research to be done on childhood bilingualism. What we do know is that children can learn two or more languages during childhood without any problems. We also know that it's often easier to learn a new language in the early years. Here are some other things that parents should keep in mind:

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- Babies learn at their own individual pace. Your child may develop her language skills at a different rate than a monolingual child (who is learning just one language), but it may have nothing to do with the fact that she is learning two languages at once. Further, research shows that children who are exposed to a rich bilingual language environment on a regular basis follow a similar course of language development as monolingual children.
- Be consistent in how you expose your child to two languages. For example, you might speak only French to her while Dad speaks only English. Or, you speak only French in the home and English outside the home. What is important is that the language is used as part of everyday life and is not done as a “teaching” session.
- Be aware that your child may develop her vocabulary at a different rate than a monolingual child. Children learning two languages at the same time may have smaller vocabularies in one or both languages compared to children learning only one language. However, when both languages are taken into consideration, bilingual children tend to have the same number of words as monolingual children. These early differences are often temporary. Usually, bilingual children catch up in their vocabulary development (if they hear both languages consistently) by the time they enter school.

And don't worry about your child getting confused by hearing two languages. She will begin to sort it out on her own, and even sometimes use words from both languages in the same sentence. This does not mean she is mixed up! It is a very normal part of the bilingual childhood experience. So delight in the joy of hearing your child explore and learn two languages. What a gift you are giving her.

Can my newborn recognize my voice?

Even very young babies are able to recognize a familiar caregiver's voice. In fact, research has shown that babies prefer speech to all other sounds. They enjoy hearing the different sounds, pitches, and tones that adults tend to use naturally when they talk with babies. By listening to your voice, babies develop language skills over time.

What can I do to help my 10-month-old learn to talk? I have a neighbor whose baby already says a few words!

There is a wide range for when young children start to talk. Some children say their first words at 9 months and others at 18 months. What's most important is that your child is moving forward in her communication skills—using her sounds, gestures and facial expressions in increasingly complex ways. For example, she moves from babbling to making consonant-vowel sounds (such as da, ma, ba). She goes from grunting when she wants something to reaching towards or pointing to what she wants.

As far as what you can do, talk a lot with your baby. Talk about what you are doing while changing his diaper, dressing him, or fixing a bottle. Sing songs, and play “back and forth” games (like peek-a-boo) throughout the day. Having early “conversations” like these helps babies learn language. It can also make transitions between activities easier and relieve stress for both of you.

I keep hearing that it is really important to talk to your baby, but does my 5-month-old really understand what I am saying to him?

While young babies don’t understand the meaning of your words, early conversations help their language skills grow. When babies hear you say words over and over, the speech and language parts of the brain are stimulated. The more language they hear, the more those parts of the brain will grow and develop.

Making up stories about daily events, singing songs about the people and places your baby knows, and describing what is happening during your daily routines give babies a solid start for learning early language skills.

Babies focus on and develop language mostly because they want to connect with you. One-on-one conversations with your baby, making eye contact while you talk, and repeating back her gurgles and coos help your baby to understand how conversations work. Responding to your baby’s sounds is also important, since these are your child’s first attempts at using language. Your response motivates her to keep trying.

My one-year-old wants to hear the same story over and over, and the same lullaby every night at bedtime. Is this normal?

Telling the same stories and singing the same songs over and over may feel boring to you, but for a young child, learning happens with repetition. When you read, give each of the characters its own interesting voice. This gives your baby the chance to hear different sounds, pitches, and tones of language. It also helps babies learn how to make sounds with their own voices.

All my friends are teaching their babies sign language. They tell me how great it is, but I’m afraid signing will keep my daughter from starting to talk. What should I do?

Studies show that signing with babies who have normal hearing doesn’t appear to slow down language development. In fact, some studies indicate that it may boost language skills. However, you’ll have to learn and use the signs yourself if you want to see results.

Interestingly, one reason signing may have positive results is because parents who sign with their baby are spending more time focusing on communicating with their child and

trying to understand what he is saying. This is something every parent can do, whether or not you decide to learn sign.

In addition, parents who sign may also be using a technique called “elaboration.” For example, when a baby makes a sign for more, the parent may say in response, You want more juice? I’ll put some more in your cup. Again, this is a great idea for all parents—whether you choose to use signs or not— because it gives babies lots of new words to hear and learn.

If you watch your baby carefully, you will see that she is signaling to you all the time. When you play a game of peek-a-boo and you stop, she reaches out and babbles to let you know she wants you to keep playing. When she raises her arms to you, she is telling you she wants you to pick her up. Responding to signals like these promotes her language skills — as well as her emotional and social development.

(<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/1018-magic-of-everyday-moments-video-and-resource-sets>)



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